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University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 2009, 236 p., ISBN 978-0-520-25682-8

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# *GOLDSTEIN Melvyn C., JIAO BEN, Lhundrup TANZEN. On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident in 1969*

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## RÉFÉRENCE

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<sup>1</sup> In his previous texts on modern Tibetan history, which are well known to Tibetologists, Melvyn C. Goldstein has proven to have a good sense for details. His books have been a thrilling revelation for those interested in the history of Tibet. Goldstein's style is easily distinguishable. It focuses very closely on the details of personal memories, as well as official documents, and especially concentrates on the details showing the events in a new and hitherto unknown light. An additional feature of his style is the effort and ability to create a thrilling and compelling story for the reader through the personal narratives. These remarks are also valid for the book under review. Authorship is in this case shared with Ben Jiao and Tanzen Lhundup, and the book is dedicated to one very interesting episode of modern history on the Tibetan plateau at the time of the Cultural Revolution, termed the "Nyemo incident" by the authors. Rather brief

comments on this “incident” have occurred in literature, but the book is the first detailed rendering of it.

<sup>2</sup> To outline the series of events presented: During the Cultural Revolution, various groups of followers of Mao’s instructions formed into two opposing factions in Lhasa in 1968. The first of them was called Nyamdre (Tib. *mnyam ‘brel*, perhaps “Alliance”) and the second Gyenlo (Tib. *gyen log*, “Rebels”). The first of them might be labeled conservative, since it often supported the existing officials of that time, with the explanation that the situation in Tibet required special treatment. The second faction, Gyenlo, was initiated by traveling Red Guards from inland China who felt the need to struggle against certain officials, following Mao’s statement about the “bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the party, government, army and all cultural circles”. The third force, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), was restricted from involvement in the emerging struggle.

<sup>3</sup> The first violent conflict of the Nyamdre and Gyenlo factions occurred in Lhasa in June 1968. The PLA did not follow the rule of non-intervention in this exceptional case and attacked two strongholds of the Gyenlo faction: the Financial Compound and the Jokhang temple. The attack resulted in the death of twelve Gyenlo activists and two soldiers. This battle fueled the hatred of Gyenlo both towards the Nyamdre and the PLA (Chapter 1: The Cultural Revolution in Tibet, pp. 11-58).

<sup>4</sup> After the conflict, the Gyenlo activists started to intensify their search for support in rural areas. One of them was Nyemo (Snye mo), located between Lhasa and Shigatse (Gzhi ka rtse), in Tsang (Gtsang). Although originally most of the local people from Nyemo supported the Nyamdre faction, and at the same time somehow the *status quo*, Gyenlo made use of the general discontent of the local people concerning the production taxes hidden behind euphemistic names such as “patriotic government grain” and “sales grain.” In particular, the second tax impoverished farmers: the tax was fixed as a portion of yields, and kept increasing largely due to exaggerated yields, which were meant to demonstrate “socialist progress.”

<sup>5</sup> The promise of a suspension of the grain taxes on the part of Gyenlo and at the same time dismantling the people’s communes found fertile ground in Nyemo and apparently also in other rural areas. Such promises were of course officially formulated in communist terminology as a struggle against the “reactionary capitalist line.”

<sup>6</sup> In Nyemo, however, later developments were very strange. A young woman named Trinley Chödrön (Tib. ‘Phrin las chos sgron), a former nun, entered the Gyenlo faction. She was considered to be insane by some people and it happened that over time she began to be possessed by deities. The authors are careful to show that from the beginning a number of people were suspicious of her. Thus her claim of being possessed by Jowo, i.e. the Buddha statue from the Jokhang temple, was seen as impossible by some educated former monks. According to them Buddhas never possessed people. But with time she won the confidence of the people, as is

traditional; this also occurred through successful healing performances. Her main possessing deity was Ani Gongmey Gyemo (Tib. *A ne gong ma'i rgyal mo*). This female deity is known from the Gesar epic for instructing the warrior Gesar. According to the authors, there was no precedent of a medium being possessed by this deity in Tibet. And it was partly through her increasing popularity among local people that the conflict acquired a new dimension.

<sup>7</sup> Here the authors again carefully examine the succession of events. The nun first underwent the ritual of “opening the doors of the veins” (Tib. *rtsa sgo phye*) by a former monk Chamba Tenzin (Tib. *Byams pa bstan 'dzin*) in order to ritually allow her possession (i.e. according to the tradition of implicit supremacy of “Buddhist deities” including Buddhist masters over the “worldly deities”). Importantly, as for several witnesses she did not oppose Mao in her revelations. She even called herself the “right hand of Chairman Mao” and proclaimed him to be the incarnation of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (who is, however, simply the representation of China in popular thought). According to the interviews included in the book, she did not openly stand against the figure of Chairman Mao during the conflict (Chapter 2: Gyenlo and Nyamdre in Nyemo County, pp. 59-85).

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the motives of the former nun were clearly connected with religion. In several interviews it is seen that she mentioned the rebuilding of monasteries as the aim of the struggle. Also of significance was the name given to the Gyenlo forces in Nyemo. During discussions, there was at first a suggestion to call them the “Army for Defending Buddhism” (Tib. *bstan bsrung dmag*). Besides other reasons for refusing it, this name had already been used by the Khampa fighters during the 1959 uprising. Another proposal met with better success, the name “Gyenlo’s Army of the Gods” (Tib. *gyen log lha dmag*). It was finally decided to use this name internally and in the countryside, but at the official level it was agreed to use the name “Headquarters of Farmers and Herdsmen”. The authors do not question whether the first name was an expression of the will of the fighters from Nyemo, but there is some probability that it was indeed so. The second name and the last one might be merely an instance of typical pragmatism taking into account the given circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> The authors concentrate on another feature of the former nun’s involvement in the struggle. This is included in the sections showing that she was viewed by the higher levels of the Gyenlo faction simply as a “tool” for attracting more of the masses to their faction— and as nothing more than a “tool”, for at the time of the final victory she would probably not be needed anymore (p. 96). The disregard for her personally, and perhaps the misunderstanding of what possession meant for Tibetans (“presence of the deity”), seems to come from the official documents, where her possession is constantly termed a “religious dance.”

<sup>10</sup> Over time, the Nyemo area witnessed an opening towards some religious practices through the medium Trinley Chödrön. Suddenly the picturesque scenes of performing possession with a Gyenlo armband on, performing fumigation rituals (*bsang*), or images of Gyenlo fighters with

*khatas* (*kha btags*) and consecrated barley grain (in the belief that these made them impenetrable to the enemy's bullets), appear to the reader. Within a short time, up to thirty "warrior-heroes" (*dpa' brtul*) claimed to have become possessed by heroes from the Gesar epic, and some of them constituted a kind of personal guard of Trinley Chödrön, who became viewed as a "goddess herself." Such scenes appeared here at the time of the tightest restrictions on any outward manifestation of religious beliefs (Chapter 3: Gyenlo on the Attack, pp. 86-106).

<sup>11</sup> In June 1969 the conflict intensified and violence appeared to an extent never seen before. In three weeks, some thirty people were killed or mutilated mostly by "warrior heroes" following the instructions of Trinley Chödrön supposedly possessed by the goddess. The usual way of mutilation was cutting off hands or legs, and the authors cite several eyewitness accounts of this as well as of case of killings. The reasons behind such cruelty seem to be first aimed against those lacking belief in the supernatural abilities of Trinley Chödrön combined with punishment of those who wanted to obstruct Gyenlo's new order in Nyemo, and those who were involved in mistreating the former local monastery and its monastic community (Chapter 4: Destroying the Demons and Ghosts, pp. 107-121).

<sup>12</sup> These violent events were followed by the attack on Bagor (Sbrag sgo) district. The army (PLA) sent several soldiers to Bagor to propagate the ideas of Chairman Mao. The Gyenlo men were ready to attack them, keeping in mind the first anniversary of the "massacre" (as it became called) of their comrades in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. Trinley Chödrön became possessed by her deity and instructed the Gyenlo fighters to kill all the soldiers. Before they were dispatched to Bagor, according to one witness, the goddess Ani Gongmey Gyemo spoke through the medium: "It is the second time for me to come to Tibet to liberate this region. You should fight hard to defend religion. From now on, all the power belongs to Buddha." Another person interviewed recalled that the nun told them: "You should believe in the gods. We are a collection of gods that are the army to defend religion, so we are unbeatable. All power now belongs to us, the group of gods... These bayonets and rifles are to kill the demons and protect ourselves". After their arrival in Bagor it turned out that the PLA soldiers were completely unarmed. According to one account, thirteen of them were killed as well as a couple of cadres.

<sup>13</sup> This was viewed as a great victory by "Gyenlo's Army of Gods" and moreover as a confirmation of Ani Gongmey Gyemo's power. This success encouraged the faction to carry out even more daring plans: to attack the county Military Squadron with the aim of getting hold of modern weapons. Before doing so, they visited Trinley Chödrön again who became possessed. She distributed knotted *khatas* saying: "If you wear this, you will never be shot or get sick." The next day some eight hundred villagers charged the Military Squadron compound and were led by possessed "warrior-heroes" wearing *khatas* given them by the medium. They were unable to break down the gate, yet at the same time no one was injured.

They ascribed it to the power of the deity possessing Trinley Chödrön, unaware of the order issued inside the Military Squadron not to fire on the attackers. Nonetheless, during the repeated attacks the Gyenlo fighters angered the soldiers guarding the buildings. After a while, the soldiers inside became furious, disobeyed their orders and started to fire on the Gyenlo forces. Several men were killed and the rest gave up in disillusionment and retreated to Nyemo (Chapter 5: The Attacks on Bagor District and Nyemo County, pp. 122-136).

<sup>14</sup> They hurriedly prepared for the attack by the PLA, which was to come later. Knowing they didn't stand a chance of resisting, many people fled to the mountains, however the area was already well encircled by PLA troops. The PLA said that leniency would be given to those who surrendered and confessed their mistakes. The desperate situation and the slim chance of escape were good enough reasons to convince some of the Gyenlo fighters to surrender. Trinley Chödrön's attempt to escape was unsuccessful and she was caught in her hide-out cave within a few days.

<sup>15</sup> Of all the people who participated, four hundred eleven were later classified as general rebels, thirty-nine as major rebels, twenty-seven as people involved in killing, and sixteen as rebel leaders. Thirty-four were executed, twenty-eight imprisoned and forty-eight placed under public surveillance (Chapter 6: The Capture of the Nun, pp. 137-161).

<sup>16</sup> Such is the brief outline of the revealing story; the length of this review does not allow for a complete survey of all the details mentioned in the book which is warmly recommended for its providing many intriguing nuances. Still it is said by the authors that many things will probably always remain hidden to us, but for any researcher collecting information in Tibet this book must be seen as a real achievement full of information collected from people involved on the various sides.

<sup>17</sup> The main contribution of the book lies in bringing us a clearer picture of the "Nyemo incident" and also its unprecedented insight into the cultural Revolution in Tibetan areas. In the introduction of the book, a survey of various previous sources mentioning the incident is presented (Introduction, pp. 1-10). None of them treats the incident in any depth. Among them, some authorities, as for example Smith's book "Tibetan Nation" mention it as the "Second Tibetan Revolt", the first being the uprising in 1959, and at the same time as an "expression of Tibetan anger at Chinese oppression."

<sup>18</sup> Even from the outline in this review, it should be apparent that such interpretation is not very accurate according to the first-hand material used in the book. Rather than one single motivation, there was an entire range of reasons for it, some of them being valid perhaps only for a few of the people involved. Such sets of different motivations were interlinked and also changed over time.

<sup>19</sup> The text, full of interviews and documents, gives the impression that among the many reasons for involvement of the Nyemo people in the conflict, the most important were the unfair grain taxes, the existence of

people's communes and the prohibition of religious practices. All of these factors were linked to the struggle of the two factions, which used a language of a different kind; the nature of the language is not discussed in the text. However, with the escalation of the conflict between the two factions, paradoxically very diverse motivations for the struggle were absorbed (Conclusions, pp. 162-171).

<sup>20</sup> One highly interesting question, not discussed in detail in the book, touches upon the nature of the "religion", which in this case squeezed through the restrictions in place at the time of the Cultural Revolution. The mention of monastic practices of Buddhism is not often emphasized in the interviews. As the authors show, they were possibly connected with Chamba Tendzin, the former monk who "opened the door of the veins" of Trinley Chödrön. Nonetheless, the accounts given are replete with concern about gods and demons. The Gyenlo forces from Nyemo were called "Gyenlo's Army of Gods" and they fought "demons." Trinley Chödrön's possessing goddess required "belief in the gods," and many more examples could be mentioned. This seemingly simple world-view seems to be of immense importance. I was surprised when during my research in Amdo several informants from the monastic community were describing events of the Cultural Revolution: as if starvation or various kinds of cruelty were less important than the fact that monks were called "demons" at that time. This general discourse of gods standing against demons seems somehow to be a part of the core of "religion" in Tibet, be it labeled Bön, Buddhism or the "nameless religion".

<sup>21</sup> What is astonishing in the story of the Nyemo incident as presented by the authors is how very practical reasons on both sides contributed to the meeting of the archaic Tibetan ideas of the struggle of gods with demons with the newly-introduced ideology of the struggle of classes. Both of them are sufficiently flexible to explain many things. Generally speaking, it would not be that difficult to assume that the "capitalist roader" was in fact a "demon." A greater problem always occurs with the established ways in which these ideas are lived through and ritually treated. What is amazing is seeing the picture of rituals (since rituals are part of the living of the idea) that are seemingly incompatible being performed side by side; be it possession by the deity or newly-introduced communist rituals such as "struggle sessions" and others.

<sup>22</sup> One of the strong points of the book is how it shows that behind two clearly distinct factions at the time of the Cultural Revolution, a number of issues lay in the background. The authors used interviews with seventy-five people living in the Nyemo area who were adults at that time, and a set of Chinese written documents brought to India at the end of Cultural Revolution. They have promised to make the originals of the interviews and documents available on the web in the future.

<sup>23</sup> In conclusion, we return to the beginning of this review mentioning M. C. Goldstein's style. Besides words of praise, the style of M. C. Goldstein has also provoked disagreement. Among one of the critiques to appear quite recently is that of Jamyang Norbu, a well-known Tibetan intellectual



figure and writer. The main thrust of his argument against M. C. Goldstein's previous book could be put in the following way: that he often focuses on marginal events and by the selection of them and the omission of others distorts historical reality. Goldstein's claim to present a balanced rendering of events is thus false. Although Jamyang Norbu was reacting to a different text (the first volume of "Modern History of Tibet", see note 1), the similar style employed in this new book might give rise to similar concerns.

<sup>24</sup> One can mention some possible reservations concerning the material used in the book. First, the "Neymo incident" is still very sensitive and its sensitivity accompanied with fear may strongly influence the interview subjects and thus silence some voices. Second, official documents from the time of the Cultural Revolution might be viewed as not very reliable, as is seen for example from the note on over-reporting of crop yields. Third, in the materials used, some are from "confessions" and in such cases there is a high probability that pressure influenced the testimonies. Fourth, detailed eye-witnessed reports on mutilation and killing in Nyemo initiated by the former nun are not "balanced" by similarly detailed eye-witness testimonies of executions of the "rebels", not to mention detailed accounts of the preceding acts of the people humiliated or killed. Moreover, historians simply work with accessible documents. I myself do not see Goldstein's previous books, as well as this book, as either distortions of Tibetan history or as a complete rendering of it. The text is a cornucopia of new information, and this is its value: the information it contains did not come out of the blue, but is the result of very precise work. Unlike Jamyang Norbu, who might be upset by the author's omission of details not easily digested by officials in China, it seems to me that M. C. Goldstein did not intend to blacken Tibetans' names. At a time when some strange marketing product of an idealized yet artificial Tibetan awaits us in nearly each corner of the globalized world, there comes a need to see the obverse side of it, to turn Tibetans into human beings of flesh and blood again. This might be the motivation for stressing certain aspects, and in the case of this book these are presented with a convincing argument and are well based on primary sources. Another message of the book is recognizable: the message which says that Tibetan history is not black and white, but a highly complicated net of motives and events involving various sides. For me, personally, this is confirmed by my own field-work in different areas. The accounts of the people involved in the conflict could be supplemented by those finding divergent ones, and the conclusion revised with well-based arguments. The authors did a good job indeed in bringing quite a large number of witnesses of this event to the reader. Without a doubt, this book deserves to be read. It is a book of high standard. And I am looking forward to reading a well-grounded critique of it soon...